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Ordering Chaos in the Novels of P.G. Wodehouse

Like many budding scholars my intellectual interests over the years have been all over the map. But my current field of specialty, British literary modernism, has been an enduring flame of interest since my sophomore year of undergrad. I didn't always know that I wanted to be a professional academic, but ever since reading the lines in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,/You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/A heap of broken images"—ever since reading those lines I knew I would spend a great deal of my life in a joyfully productive struggle with them. Nearly ten years later I still struggle with them, and my research has me struggling every day with the conceptually heavy literature of other high modernists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. But this isn't the story of heavy things. This is the story of how I cultivated a passion for reading and learning in those early years despite the overwhelming sense I gained from Eliot that knowledge will not come easy in my life. This is the story of how a "gentleman's gentleman" named Jeeves ("not a butler," but someone who "can buttle with the best of them") became my accidental guide through the chaos of my expanding intellectual world (*Stiff Upper Lip* 5-6).

I first studied T.S. Eliot that fateful sophomore year in a large lecture class, "British Literature 1789-present," at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. The class was overwhelming and impersonal, and I found myself enthusiastic but unguided. Faced with such an abundance of things-to-be-learned, I began where knowledge is housed—I wandered through the stacks of the literature floor of the library in an effort to find a way into this world of all that has been thought and known. I remember taking a moment to feel myself poised on the edge of a vast ocean of knowledge, seconds away from jumping in. The reality, I realized once I cracked

open a few books, was far more discouraging than I had imagined. After months of wandering stacks, skimming books, and treading water I realized I was without mooring and more desperate than ever. The amount to be learned was daunting—in my undeveloped vision all was chaos.

Shortly after reaching this desperation point, however, one typical winter day found me sheltered in the library from a snowstorm. I had begun to nod off over my Medieval Art History textbook, so I decided to wander the stacks to find a book that might wake me up a bit. In one random aisle I grabbed the orange spine of a slim volume simply because the title intrigued me. *Right Ho, Jeeves* by P.G. Wodehouse was published in 1934, shortly after the heyday of modernism, the body of literature I had just recently grown to love. I wondered why I hadn't come across this author in my Norton anthology or heard him mentioned in class. When I sat down and read this novel cover-to-cover, it was pretty easy to figure out why—this was no *Finnegan's Wake*, no member of the canon of “high” literature. This was self-consciously and proudly middle-brow. Hear how the narrator speaks of his friend Gussie Fink-Nottle's fondness for newts: “he had put me right off my feed by bringing a couple of green things with legs to the luncheon table, crooning over them like a young mother and eventually losing one of them in the salad. That picture[...] didn't give me much confidence in the unfortunate goof's ability to woo and win, I must say” (11). It was funny, conversational, light-hearted. It was the anti-modernist novel, but was still somehow inviting to my analytic faculties. I was hooked.

In all of the Jeeves novels, as I would soon learn, the narrator and main character, affable upper-class bachelor Bertie Wooster, finds himself committing a series of social blunders from which only the genius of Jeeves can save him. What for Bertie are “just Life's mysteries, and that's all there is to it,” Jeeves dissects with ease and aplomb (*My Man Jeeves* 1). In *Code of the Woosters*, for example, the plot delightfully twists and turns around Bertie's inability to recover

and retain an antique dairy creamer in the shape of a cow for his Aunt Dahlia.¹ As his social world descends into uproarious chaos around him, Jeeves silently glides in and deftly untangles the plot's complications, rearranging everything back to where it belongs. Bertie is naturally quite fond of Jeeves. He serves as Bertie's valet and perfect foil. I saw myself in Bertie's affable cluelessness, and saw the scholar I wished to become in Jeeves's thoughtful care. I admired his easy ability to make order out of chaos. If modernist literature evoked the murky waters of "Life's mysteries" for me, Jeeves would model the self-possession and confidence I needed in order to navigate through.

My growing interest in books in general at the time led me to check out the used bookstores near campus. Entering into these ramshackle repositories of desuetude would have thrown me into an even greater pit of despair than the vast organized spaces of the library, but this time I knew right where to start. Wodehouse eventually became my obsession—at least once a month I would go to one particular musty little dungeon a few blocks from my apartment to seek out Wodehouse trade paperbacks, sold for mere dollars. Finding a Jeeves adventure I didn't have yet felt like winning the lottery, and watching my personal library grow from a few volumes to a full shelf was a great pleasure. I saw a correlation between my growing collection and my growing self-confidence. For the first time in my life I had something I cared about, a garden to cultivate, and something that mirrored a very real change in who I was.

It was through Wodehouse that I discovered that my love of literature was undergirded by a love of the playfulness of language. Wodehouse's way with words is a perfect melding of the styles of his two complementary protagonists—fast and loose, yet scrupulously proper. To me, a sentence such as "I marmaladed a slice of toast with something of a flourish, and I don't suppose

¹ Incidentally, modernist texts didn't corner the market in difficulty—this may be because of my temporal and cultural distance from the text, but it wasn't until about a hundred pages into *Code of the Woosters* that I realized what "cow-creamer" referred to. This only made it all the more funny.

I have ever come much closer to saying ‘Tra-la-la’ as I did the lathering, for I was feeling in mid-season form this morning” was as staggeringly beautiful as anything written by Woolf (*Stiff Upper Lip* 5). Bertie has a charmingly creative way with words, turning nouns into verbs decades before the practice become typical in our age of internet neologisms—I wouldn’t be surprised to read of him ‘googling’ or ‘blogging.’ Where Bertie’s language is loose and approximate, Jeeves’s was utterly precise. Bertie claims, “you must have heard of newts. Those little sort of lizard things that charge about in ponds,” to which Jeeves replies without a beat, “oh, yes, sir. The aquatic members of the family Salamandridae which constitute the genus *Molge*” (*Right Ho* 8). Reading their dialogue is an always hilarious lesson in the flexibility of the English language.

As I grew as a scholar and turned my energy toward my studies, I sort of left Wodehouse behind. The collection still grew by a book here, a book there, but when I could find the time to read them it was more as just a diversion than a guiding experience. It wasn’t until after college, as I found myself once again plunged into the chaos of an unfamiliar world (the ‘real world’), that I returned to these texts to provide me with a sense of structure and familiarity. During this time, years after finding Wodehouse in the library, I visited with some old friends from high school and described to them what I had been reading. I talked with competence and, most important, with *confidence* on the historical implications of the Jeeves novels in relation to our understanding of modernism, and for the first time I felt the joys of teaching, a joy that sustains my academic pursuits even at their most frustrating moments. The ongoing joy I feel in studying and teaching literature cannot be summed up in the words of any modernist, but in the words of Bertie Wooster on the effects of a good meal, “the soul seemed to expand as if someone had got to work on it with a bicycle pump” (*Code of the Woosters* 85).

Kelly Oman

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